



The history of 'semilingualism': From Nazi linguistics to contemporary minority language politics

By Dr. David Karlander

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In this talk, David Karlander traces the origins of 'semilingualism' in the work of Swedish linguist Nils Erik Hansegård (1918-2002), linking it to Hansegård's reception of Nazi German linguistics as well as to his involvement in the minority language politics of Sweden's far North in the 1950s and 1960s. Karlander shows how semilingualism comprises three conceptual elements: 1) mother tongue-as-worldview, 2) inner-outer language isomorphism, and 3) pathological bilingualism. Hansegård borrowed these ideas from Nazi German scholars like Georg Schmidt-Rohr (1890-1945) and Friedrich Kainz (1897-1977). Hansegård employed the resulting theory to criticize Sweden's treatment of its northern ethnolinguistic minorities – the Sámi, Tornedalians and Finns – arguing that many members of these communities had become linguistically and cognitively damaged by Sweden's monoglot minority language policies. This advocacy turned out politically effective. As a result – and perhaps paradoxically Hansegård's malformed theory, grounded in Nazi linguistics, became a catalyst for progressive language political change, contributing to extensive policy revisions in the 1970s.

The event is organized by the Centre for Human Interactivity,
Department of Language, Culture, History and Communication.